The Analysis of Verbal Behavior 1992, 10, 81-86

Aspects of Conversational Style— Linguistic Versus Behavioral Analysis

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Skinner's functional analysis of verbal behavior has been contrasted with formal linguistic analysis which studies the grammatical structure and "meaning" of verbal response-products, regardless of the circumstances under which they are produced. Nevertheless, it appears that certain areas of linguistic analysis are not entirely structural. In her recent books *That's Not What I Meant* (1986) and *You Just Don't Understand* (1990), the linguist Deborah Tannen purports to explain how people exhibit different "conversation styles"—that is, how they speak and achieve effects on listeners in different ways. There are indications, however, that the linguistic model may not be the most functional and precise one that could be used in analyzing conversational style. This paper takes concepts presented in Deborah Tannen's book *That's Not What I Meant* (1986), analyzes them from a linguistic and a behavioral perspective, and compares the relative utility of the two approaches.

Skinner's book *Verbal Behavior* (1957) provides a functional analysis of language from the perspective of an individual speaker. This analysis focuses not only on behavior, but on the variables of which behavior is a function. Skinner's approach has been contrasted with formal linguistic analysis which studies the grammatical structure and "meaning" of verbal response-products, regardless of the circumstances under which they are produced. Behaviorists have described Skinner's analysis as a "fresh formulation" which provides a functional alternative to the structural linguistic approach.

Nevertheless, there are indications that certain areas of linguistic analysis may not be entirely structural. The area of pragmatics, for instance, has focused on "language use." Recently, certain linguists have written popular books which purport to explain the functions of language. Such books create the impression that linguistics can be functional.

For instance, in her book *Talking Power, the Politics of Language* (1990), the linguist Robin Lakoff discusses how people achieve dominance and control over others through language. According to Lakoff (p. 6), "...the fundamental question of linguistics is 'How are the forms of language related to the use we make of it?'"

Deborah Tannen is another linguist who has studied the functions of language. In her recent books, *That's Not What I Meant* (1986) and *You Just Don't Understand* (1990), Tannen explains how people with different socialization experiences exhibit different "conversational styles"; that is, they speak and achieve effects on listeners in different ways. According to Tannen, these differences in style make conversations inherently ambiguous and may lead to misunderstandings, poor interactions, and disrupted relationships.

Judging from the popularity of Tannen's books, conversational style is an important topic to many people and the linguistic terms and concepts used in the analysis have been at least somewhat effective in describing this subject matter. In some cases, people claim that their relationships or marriages have been saved

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by reading Tannen's books. It would appear, then, that the linguistic approach has enabled people to take effective practical action with respect to the subject matter.

Nevertheless, there are certain indications that linguistic analysis may not be the most effective and precise model that could be used in providing a functional analysis of conversational style (and verbal behavior, in general). Many linguistic terms and concepts are not inherently functional and therefore seem inconsistent with a functional analysis.

For instance, the linguistic term "communication" implies that a hypothetical mental entity, an "idea," is conveyed from speaker to listener, not that the speaker emits *behavior* as a function of certain controlling variables. Thus, the term "communication" detracts from a functional analysis, which, by definition, does identify the controlling variables for behavior. In his book *Verbal Behavior*, Skinner avoids such terms and proposes new ones (such as mands, tacts, echoics, intraverbals, etc.) that are more consistent with a functional analysis.

This paper will focus on certain concepts presented in Deborah Tannen's book *That's Not What I Meant*, analyze them from a linguistic and a behavioral perspective, and compare the relative utility of the two approaches.

In *That's Not What I Meant*, Tannen's basic premise is that people have different conversational styles and these different styles lead to misunderstandings and disrupted relationships. According to Tannen,

> We find ourselves caught in miscommunication because the very methods—and the only methods—we have of communicating are not, as they seem, self-evident and "logical." Instead, they differ from person to person, especially in a society like ours where individuals come from such varied cultural backgrounds. (p. 13)

> A lot of seemingly inexplicable behavior...occurs because others react to our style of talking in ways that lead them to conclusions that we never suspect. Many of our motives, so obvious to us, are never perceived by the people we talk to. Many instances of rudeness, stubbornness, inconsiderateness or refusal to cooperate are really caused by differences in conversational style. (p. 13)

From a behavioral point of view, she is essentially saying that people have different ways of achieving effects on listeners and reinforcing the behavior of speakers, due to different reinforcement histories. If people come from verbal communities with fundamentally different reinforcing practices, they will not behave appropriately as listeners for one another and will fail to reinforce each other's verbal behavior in the manner in which each has become accustomed. As a result, verbal interactions will become aversive and people may tact one another's behavior as rude, stubborn, or inconsiderate.

Tannen gives numerous examples of how differences in conversational style can lead to misunderstandings. The following example illustrates how different socialization experiences appear to have led to differences in style and subsequent misunderstandings between Tannen and her ex-husband:

> One of the biggest troublemakers in our marriage was the seemingly innocent little question "Why?" Having grown up in a family in which explanations were offered as a matter of course, I was always asking my husband, "Why?" He had grown up in a family in which explanations were neither offered nor sought, so when I asked "Why?," he looked for hidden meaning—and concluded that I was questioning his decision and even his right to make it. My continually asking "Why?" seemed to him an effort to show him up as incompetent. (p. 9)

From a linguistic perspective, the main problem seems to be that Tannen and her ex-husband do not share the same meaning for the word "Why?" To Tannen, asking "Why?" is simply a request for elaboration of the initial statement. To Tannen's husband, her asking "Why?" has "hidden meaning"; that is, she is "questioning his decision and even his right to make it."

A behavioral translation would focus on controlling variables rather than meaning. When Tannen's husband made a statement and Tannen asked "Why?," she was not reinforcing his verbal behavior in the manner in which his previous verbal community—his family—had reinforced it. "Why?" was likely an aversive consequence which punished rather than reinforced his behavior. To him, the listener's

response "Why?" may have been functionally substitutable for, "That's a dumb idea. Why would you want to do that?" To Tannen, asking "Why?" was perhaps functionally substitutable for, "That's an interesting idea. Tell me more about that." His response to her question "Why?," an angry explosive outburst, also punished rather than reinforced her behavior. These differences in conversational style eventually destroyed the cooperative contingency between them (roughly translated, "I'll reinforce your verbal behavior if you reinforce mine") and their relationship ended.

In her book, Tannen describes certain elements of conversational style and illustrates how individual differences in these areas can lead to misunderstandings. One important element identified by linguists is known as "indirectness." According to Tannen,

> People prefer not to say what they mean in so many words because they're not concerned only with the ideas they're expressing: they're also—even more—concerned with the effect their words will have on those they're talking to. They want to make sure to maintain comraderie, to avoid imposing, and to give (or at least appear to give) the other person some choice in the matter being discussed. And different people have different ways of honoring these potentially conflicting goals. (pp. 7-8)

In this definition of indirectness, several linguistic terms do not seem to be functional. According to the description, indirectness occurs when people do not "say what they mean" in so many words. "Saying what you mean" does not specify controlling variables for behavior. It suggests that the speaker is conveying a hypothetical mental entity—meaning—to the listener. People not being "concerned only with the ideas they are expressing" suffers from similar problems. The "expression of ideas" suggests that ideas are conveyed from speaker to listener. Behaviorally, the main point seems to be that the verbal behavior of the speaker is often strengthened or maintained by consequences related to specific effects on the listener rather than by generalized conditioned reinforcers. Further, these specific effects are not manded.

From a behavioral perspective, several of the verbal operants described in Skinner's book *Verbal Behavior* seem to fall into the linguistic category of "indirectness." One such operant is the impure tact (pp. 147-163).

Pure tacts are maintained by generalized reinforcers such as social approval or educational reinforcers—a parent or teacher saying "right" or "good," for example, when a child names an object correctly. In impure tacts, "Stimulus control is distorted by consequences which are more important to the speaker than generalized reinforcement" (p. 151). In other words, the response becomes less "objective"—it is reinforced by achieving some specific effect on the listener. As Skinner has indicated, "Generalized reinforcement is most obvious and most useful in the original conditioning of verbal behavior..." In mature speakers, "The action which a listener takes with respect to a verbal response is often more important to the speaker than generalized reinforcement" (p. 151).

For instance, a speaker may say "Dinner is ready" not because the response achieves generalized reinforcement (such as "You're right! Dinner is ready!"), but because it results in people coming to the table. Here, the form of the response is controlled partly by a nonverbal stimulus (the fact that dinner is ready) and partly by an establishing operation or motivative variable (the table is empty, and that state of affairs is mildly aversive to the speaker). The response is therefore an impure tact; it is part tact and part mand.

Thus, it is often possible to control the behavior of listeners not by manding their behavior, but by tacting a state of affairs that would lead them to engage in that behavior. If seeing a friend put on a coat would function as reinforcement, a person may say, "It's cold outside." This response is functionally very similar to the mand, "Go put on a coat," but perhaps less aversive to the listener and less likely to lead to a hostile response like "Don't tell me what to do." If receiving something to drink would function as reinforcement, a speaker may say, "I'm thirsty." Again, this

response is functionally similar to the mand, "Bring me some water," but less aversive to the listener and more likely to maintain a cooperative contingency between speaker and listener.

Impure tacts may also be reinforced by other effects on the listener, such as emotional reactions. For example, saying, "That suit looks really good on you" might be reinforced by signs of positive emotional responding on the part of the listener. To achieve these reactions, it would be ineffective to mand the behavior. As Skinner indicates, "The most reliable method of generating an emotion is to present an appropriate stimulus" (p. 154).

The intraverbal is another verbal operant which may be indirect in the sense that the speaker does not say what he or she means in so many words. Much of what we call conversational behavior is intraverbal. With the intraverbal as well as the impure tact, achieving specific effects on the listener may reinforce the speaker's behavior. For example, in response to the question, "Are you busy tonight?" a speaker may say "No, I don't have anything planned." Saying "No, I don't have anything planned" is an intraverbal that may be reinforced by a specific effect—being invited to dinner. In conversation, the participants often seem to take turns motivating one another to achieve specific effects, and emitting intraverbal responses which have been reinforced in the past by achieving these effects.

With ongoing intraverbal interactions, it sometimes appears that very large units of behavior are emitted to achieve specific effects. For example, a speaker may give a detailed explanation of a point, continuing until the listener nods and makes some statement indicating agreement. Until this effect is achieved, the speaker continues talking. Here, signs of agreement appear to be the effects on the listener that reinforce the speaker's behavior. It is often difficult for an observer to analyze the functions of conversation because specific effects on the listener are not manded and it is difficult to isolate units of behavior achieving certain effects.

In addition to impure tacts and intraverbals, many autoclitics are also indirect. According to Skinner, autoclitic behavior is "based upon or depends upon other verbal behavior" (p. 315). An autoclitic modifies the listener's reaction to some primary form of verbal behavior. Suppose a speaker says, "I hesitate to say that my report will be finished tomorrow." Here, "I hesitate to say" is an autoclitic suggesting that the response "my report will be finished tomorrow" is weak. "I hesitate to say" therefore enjoins the listener to take action appropriate to the circumstances: my report might not be finished tomorrow. This autoclitic achieves specific effects without manding the behavior of the listener.

In analyzing indirectness from a behavioral point of view, it becomes clear that this category includes many different functions. Whereas linguistic analysis defines indirectness as "not saying what one means in so many words" (which is a structural rather than a functional definition), behavioral analysis focuses on a number of smaller concepts—impure tacts, intraverbals, and autoclitics—and defines them in terms of their controlling variables. It is possible that all verbal behavior which is strengthened or maintained by specific effects on the listener, but is not pure manding, is indirect. One wonders, then, at the usefulness of such an all-inclusive category.

Closely related to indirectness is the linguistic concept of "metamessages." According to Tannen, "Information conveyed by the meaning of words is the message. What is communicated about relationships, attitudes toward each other, the occasion, and what we are saying—is the metamessage. And it's metamessages we react to most strongly" (pp. 15-16).

Suppose two friends are gossiping with each other. A third person, Betty, walks up. As Betty approaches, one of the two friends starts to tell Betty what they were talking about. Here, the actual statement about what they had been talking about is the message and the metamessage might be, "Come join us. We want to include

you." If they had continued talking to each other as Betty walked up and ignored her, the metamessage might be, "Go away. We don't want to include you."

From a behavioral standpoint, the metamessage seems to be a functionally substitutable verbal response which mands the behavior of the listener and/or tacts a state of affairs that is likely to produce a specific effect on the listener. In this example, "Come join us. We want to include you" would be functionally substitutable with one of the friends telling Betty what they were talking about.

The odd thing about metamessages, however, is that they are hypothetical; they may not really exist. When Betty is told what the two people were talking about, there is no need to invoke functionally substitutable responses such as "Come join us. We want to include you." No one has actually emitted this response, and Betty doesn't have to verbalize this metamessage before she can join them. Although it is often possible to contrive metamessages, there is no indication that they play a functional role in verbal interactions. Like "communication," the term "metamessage" suggests that a mental entity is conveyed from speaker to listener. This model seems inconsistent with a functional analysis of verbal behavior, which focuses on actual behavior and the circumstances under which it occurs.

Two additional linguistic concepts described by Tannen are "needs for involvement" and "needs for independence." These are said to be important sources of motivation for behavior. As Tannen explains, "We all keep balancing the needs for involvement and independence...We need to get close to each other to have a sense of community, to feel we're not alone in the world. But we need to keep our distance from each other to preserve our independence, so others don't impose on or engulf us" (pp. 17-18).

From a behavioral point of view, the point seems to be that events related to social contact and controlling the environment function as reinforcers for behavior. It is not always possible to consume these reinforcers at the same time. When establishing operations related to social contact are strong, a person may become more involved in cooperative interactions and give up some control; when establishing operations related to control are strong, a person may become less involved in cooperative interactions and give up some social contact.

Again, the linguistic description of involvement versus independence does not seem functional. The relevant establishing operations and reinforcers are not identified. Expressions such as "get close to one another" and "have a sense of community" suggest, but do not specify certain types of reinforcers.

One further linguistic concept which Tannen emphasizes is the concept of "framing." According to Tannen,

> Framing is a way of showing how we mean what we say or do and figuring out how others mean what they say or do...Subtle signals like pitch, tone of voice, intonation, and facial expression work along with the words we say, to frame each utterance as serious, joking, teasing, angry, polite, rude, ironic, and so on. These small, passing frames reflect and create the larger frames that identify the activities going on. For example, utterances framed as giving information contribute to the framing of a larger activity, 'teaching'...Framing can be done only indirectly, through metamessages. If you try to name a frame, you indirectly invoke a different one. (pp. 74-75)

Behaviorally, framing seems to involve the presentation of conditional or contextual stimuli. For example, a listener may respond differently to the mand, "Come here," depending on the speaker's tone of voice (because, in the past, different tones of voices were correlated with different consequences for following instructions). Along the same lines, a listener may react positively or negatively to a statement such as "I love your hair," depending on the speaker's facial expression or tone of voice.

Tannen's description of framing indicates that "Framing is a way of showing how we mean what we say." Again, the term "meaning" is not inherently functional, as discussed earlier. The linguistic description also implies that people responding to contextual stimuli covertly label the relevant frames. This is similar to

the notion that a listener actually states metamessages before responding to an indirect form of verbal behavior. Both possibilities seem unlikely. It is more parsimonious to assume that the listener simply responds to the relevant stimulus conditions.

To summarize, the concepts of conversational style, indirectness, metamessages, need for involvement, need for independence, and framing have been analyzed from a linguistic and a behavioral point of view. Although the linguistic analyses purport to be functional, it was found that linguistic terms and concepts have certain inherent problems: they fail to specify the controlling variables for behavior, they invoke hypothetical mental entities and explanatory fictions, and they are imprecise.

One might ask, then, how books such as *"That's Not What I Meant"* and *"You Just Don't Understand"* could be so popular and why people claim that linguistics has saved their relationships. How can people take effective practical action on the basis of these analyses? Perhaps analyzing conversational style using any model is more useful than not analyzing it at all. As Tannen indicates,

> An idea that has been central to linguistics is the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis...This is the idea that language shapes thought. We tend to think in the terms and related concepts our language gives us. It is easier to conceive of something if we have a word for it; we instinctively feel that something for which there is a word really exists. Anything for which there is no word seems somehow to lack substance. In this way, knowing the terms "frame," "metamessage," and "conversational style" makes it easier not only to talk about but also to think about how ways of talking shape communication. (p. 187)

Although the linguistic terms "frame," "metamessage," and "conversational style" fail to specify the precise functions of verbal behavior, they allow people to tact certain behavioral categories, perhaps for the first time. Tannen's analyses also include more than linguistic terminology; they suggest or allude to certain controlling variables for behavior, such as history effects. With sophisticated speakers and listeners, it is conceivable that tacting these broad behavioral categories and inferring certain controlling variables may enable them to develop rules to improve their interactions with one another. Under the control of rules, for example, a speaker might emit verbal responses that are less likely to evoke objectionable listener reactions, or a listener may begin reinforcing the behavior of the speaker in more effective ways.

Nevertheless, it appears that the behavioral model is much more consistent with a functional analysis of conversational style (and verbal behavior, in general) than the linguistic approach. Behavioral analysis specifies precise controlling variables for behavior and distinguishes between categories of behavior controlled by different variables (such as impure tacts, intraverbals, and autoclitics), thus achieving a finer-grained analysis of verbal behavior. When the controlling variables for behavior are clearly specified, there is a greater likelihood that those variables can be manipulated to change behavior. Although Tannen's linguistic analyses have facilitated effective practical action to a certain extent, they may have done so *in spite of* the terminology used, rather than because of it.

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